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ABSTRACT

The field of interpretation needs to be more aware of and sensitive to the contributions of black culture and consciousness. The interpreter wishing to perform black poetry, for example, needs to recognize that the black aesthetic has its roots in African culture and traditions and does not always share the assumptions of the European or Euro-American literary traditions. Oral tradition, with frequent religious and musical overtones, influences all areas of black culture and art and exemplifies the collective nature of black expression. It creates an art form that is rhetorical and demands response. Rising from oppression, African and Afro-American literature have never accepted art for art's sake but have always worked to fulfill a function: to move the emotions, to become part of the dance, or to make one act. The oral tradition is evident in the black poetry of the 1960s--its musicality demands that works be read aloud. As part of an effort to devote more serious attention to black poetry, critic Stephen Henderson developed three broad categories for defining the black aesthetic: theme, structure, and "saturation," (in general terms, the communication of the black experience). (MM)

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Interpretation and the Black Aesthetic: A New Text to be Matched

Mark Lawrence McPhail

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Having recently completed the Master's program in interpretation at Northwestern University, I am both concerned and dismayed at the lack of attention which I perceived to the contribution of black aesthetics to the field. This lack of attention was most notably evident in a seminar in the history of interpretation, which dealt only with European and Euro-American perspectives while ignoring African and Afro-American traditions, which clearly have a great deal to offer the discipline. In this paper I will present a survey of African and Afro-American oral traditions which have important educational, cultural, and social value, and which have the potential to provide students and scholars in the field with a fuller realization of what Wallace Bacon describes as "the otherness of others."[1] Indeed, the black aesthetic offers interpretation, to echo one of Mr. Bacon's central concepts, a new text to be matched.

The black aesthetic has a great deal of theoretical and practical contributions to offer the field of interpretation. From the African oral poets of the past and present, to the black poets of the sixties whose works can be directly traced to African ancestry, oral tradition has always been an element of primary importance in the black aesthetic. Black art is also highly expressive of the cultural richness of black history and consciousness and is, as Don L. Lee suggests in Dynamite Voices, both functional and collective; "art for the people's sake."[2] Unfortunately, black art, and especially black poetry, is often viewed from a Eurocentric perspective that trivializes and undermines the historical, cultural and aesthetic significance which it possesses. Stephen Henderson, a

black critic whose book Understanding the New Black Poetry remains one of the seminal explications of the black aesthetic, points out the problematic nature of this Eurocentric point of view;

> Black poetry in the United States has been widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and undervalued for a variety of reasons—aesthetic, cultural, and political—especially by white critics; but with the exception of the work of a few established figures, it has also been suspect by many Black academicians whose literary judgements are self-consciously "objective" and whose cultural values, while avowedly "American," are essentially European.[3]

Henderson goes on to outline the distinguishing characteristics of black poetry and offers three broad critical categories; theme, structure, and "saturation," a theoretical concept which he describes as "several things, chiefly the communication of 'Blackness' and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black experience in the United States."[4] An understanding and appreciation of these concepts is necessary in any critical interpretation of black poetry, and is especially important in oral performance. The interpreter who wishes to perform black poetry needs to be aware of the cultural and historical traditions from which it has evolved, and needs to be sensitive to the differences between those traditions and the European and Euro-American literary traditions which are often imposed upon black art.

The foundational elements of the black aesthetic can be directly traced to pre-Diaspora African culture and tradition. In her dissertation entitled Traditional Wit and Humor in Pan-Afrikan Drama, Ms. Njoki McElroy explicates many of the undergirding elements of the black aesthetic in her exploration of wit and humor.[5] She also explores much of the history and cultural traditions of pre-and post-Diaspora African peoples, indicating the extent to which primary orality has maintained itself as an important force in black culture and aesthetics. Lawrence W. Levine amplifies Ms. McElroy's findings when he writes in Black Culture and Black Consciousness:

> In their songs, as in their tales, aphorisms, proverbs, anecdotes, and jokes, Afro-American slaves, following the practices of the African cultures they had been forced to leave behind them, assigned a central role to the spoken arts, encouraged and rewarded verbal improvisation, maintained the participatory nature of their expressive culture, and utilized the spoken arts to voice criticism as well as to uphold traditional values and group cohesion.[6]

Levine's observation suggests the extent to which African and Afro-American oral traditions reflect the history and culture of peoples whose sense of poetic expression of the spoken word "best stands the tests of the ages, because more than any other, it is concerned with the destiny of the spirit."[7] Lamine Niang, in his essay on Negro-African poetry, states that poetry provides not only a vehicle

of expression, but also functions "in the absence of a written language," to insure the survival of black historical consciousness and culture.[8] In his analysis of the historical and social significance of black poetry he notes that "a poem in the last resort, is nothing but the expression, through images and rhythm, of profound feelings. So much the better if the feelings are noble. Negro-African poetry is functional."[9] Niang's words not only echo Don L. Lee's claim of functionality, but also Wallace Bacon's contention that "poems ask us to understand, to feel with them."[10] Indeed, it is the expression of profound feelings found in African poetry which lay the foundations for Afro-American poetry, poetry that led Garcia Lorca to state that "the negroes are the poetic salt of the earth."[11]

The oral traditions of the black aesthetic extend to all areas of black culture and art, and often these traditions incorporate elements of musical and religious expression. This underlying artistic cohesion exemplifies the collective and communal nature of black expression and offers important contributions to interpretation, especially in terms of such concepts as "the sense of the other" and "the shared experience." For example, the slave spirituals, which were a form of communal experience deeply rooted in African oral tradition and folk expression, are noted by Levine as an important element in maintaining individual and group cohesion. His discussion of the antiphonal response structure of the spirituals explicates the nature of the dialectical relationship between the individual and the community, and the central role which this relationship played in maintaining the "communality that had bound African societies together."[12]

Levine's observation holds important implications for the interpretation theorist whose interests lie in the binding and healing effects of oral expression, as well as for the individual concerned with the psychological dimensions of performance. Quite obviously, the element of collective expression found in the black aesthetic offers a wealth of cultural resources for the study of performance. For example, the black aesthetic is undergirded to a large extent by the oral traditions embedded in black folk thought and religious expression. Just as black art integrates oral and musical traditions, so too does it include cultural and historical traditions. This integration of traditions threaded by orality is one of the foundational elements of African and Afro-American expression and culture. One of the finest examples of this cohesive integration is James Weldon Johnson's description of the black preacher in God's Trombones. Johnson writes that;

> The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator, and in good measure an actor. He knew the secret of oratory, that at bottom it is a progression of rhythmic intoning of sheer incoherencies.... His imagination was bold and unfettered. He had the power to sweep his hearers before him; and so himself was not swept away. At times his language was not prose but poetry.[13]

Johnson's preacher exemplifies the thread of orality which weaves its way through religion, oratory, drama, and poetry, and seems to embody

some common concerns of the art of interpretation, such as his knowlege of voice and articulation, or his being "swept away" by what seems to be nothing less than divine inspiration.

All of these elements of the black aesthetic interact to create an art form that is rhetorical, and that demands response. The thread of orality has continued to weave its way through black art, religion, and social consciousness, and is very much present in a great deal of Afro-American literature. Afro-American art in general, and Afro-American literature in particular, express the history, thought, and culture of a people whose oral traditions have survived and now demand acknowledgement. Afro-Americans are, as Carolyn Rodgers points out, "a nation of oral rapping poets. Waiting to be dealt with. The direction of Black Literature? We must ultimately return to the oral from which we've never really left."[14] The direction which Rodgers sees for black literature is one which the field of interpretation also seems to be headed in, and which I believe, has the potential to bring the study of the black aesthetic and the discipline of oral interpretation together.

However, for the black aesthetic to be truly integrated into the discipline, its differences as well as its similarities must be addressed. Because of the circumstances of oppression out of which it arose, African and Afro-American literature has always sought to serve some functional purpose. As William H. Robinson notes, "Fanon's pattern of literary evolution through the three stages of assimilationist, prerevolutionary, and revolutionary writings is especially vivid in the Afro-American context."[15] The literature of Afro-Americans has been a means of assimilation, integration, and finally revolution. Don L.Lee states in Dynamite Voices that;

> a Black poem is written not to be read and put aside, but to actually become a part of the giver and receiver. It must perform some function; move the emotions, become a part of the dance, or simply make one act. Whereas the work itself is perishable, the style and spirit of the creation are maintained and used and re-used to produce new works. Clearly, art for art's sake is something out of a European dream and does not exist, in most cases, for Black poets.[16]

Lee's book is one of the seminal works of black literary criticism which begins to offer a definition of the black aesthetic. Lee's major concern is with the black poets of the sixties, a group of poets not given the same recognition as black poets such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Claude McKay, and Robert Hayden, but whose message is just as eloquent and perhaps even more urgent. He explains that, although black poetry of the sixties is not very different from that of the fourties and fifties, it is distinct in that the sixties brought about an awareness of a black collective consciousness. In defining the aesthetic and theoretical assumptions of black poetry of the sixties, Lee explicates a number of characteristics of these works which offer important contributions to the field of interpretation, perhaps the most important being his claim that black poetry possesses "musicality—the unique use of vowels and consonants with the developed rap, demanding that the poetry be read out loud."[17]

Another of the important works which echos this same call, as well as also being a foundational work in the criticism of black poetry is Stephen Henderson's Understanding the New Black Poetry, which traces the evolution of black poetry from pre-Harlem Renaissance writing, through the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, and up to the "New Black Consciousness" of the sixties poets. Henderson points out in his introduction that;

> This Black poetry deserves much more serious attention than it now receives, especially from Black academicians and others who profess a concern with cultural clarity, historical accuracy, and social justice.[18]

Henderson goes on to describe three broad critical categories for analytical purposes, and begins to define the black aesthetic in terms of (1) Theme, or "that which is spoken of, whether the specific subject matter, the emotional response to it, or its intellectual formulation." (2) Structure, which is "some aspect of the poem such as diction rhythm, figurative language, which goes into the total makeup." (3) Saturation, "chiefly the communication of 'Blackness' and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black experience in the United States."[19] Henderson's exploration of the black aesthetic deals in great part with the social and psychic function of black poetry, describing it as "an art of liberating vision."[20] Especially interesting is his discussion of structure, specifically its tenth category, the poem as "score" or "chart," which raises the issue of "limit", or performance, of a text, or what Larry Neal calls "the destruction of the text."[21]

Henderson's discussion of this issue alone provides new insights into some of the important concerns of scholars in the field of interpretation. He writes;

> By "destruction of the text," Neal, if I understand him correctly, refers both to the relegation of the printed poem to the status of a "musical score," and to a lack of concern with "permanence" in the Western, Platonic sense of IDEAL FORM. A poem may thus differ from performance to performance just as jazz performances of "My Favorite Things" would.[22]

The issue which Henderson raises via Neal is none other than the idea of text performing performer, and it is an issue which is presently being explored by many interpretation theorists. Quite obviously, this issue and the concepts already discussed in this paper suggest that there is a great deal which the black literary aesthetic has to offer the field of interpretation. The contributions of blacks to the field of interpretation have yet to be as fully realized as they could be, in light of their historical, sociological, cultural and aesthetic significance. J. Saunders Redding, in his essay "On Being Negro in America," presents a major challenge to the field of interpretation when he writes;

> What Lilian Smith calls "the old conspiracy of silence" needs to be broken, and the "maze of fantasy and falsehood that (has) little resemblance to the actual world" needs to be dis-

> solved. The psychopathic resistance to self-knowledge that the American mind has developed must be broken down. What we have got to know are the things that actually happened—and are still happening—in America. With these things clear before us, perhaps we can use our knowledge and experience for the guidance of mankind.[23]

What discipline could be better suited to ending a "conspiracy of silence" than one which celebrates, so beautifully, the spoken word?

In this paper I have presented what I consider to be compelling evidence to support my contention that the field of interpretation needs to be more aware of, and sensitive to, the contributions of black culture and consciousness. There is nothing to lose except perhaps ignorance, and worlds of knowledge and experience to gain. I do not believe that there are any limits to the potential that the field of interpretation has for bringing together people of different races, backgrounds, and religions through the medium of oral performance, and thus, my vision for the future of interpretation is an integration and celebration of black art and culture through the black aesthetic. If I have contributed nothing else to this discipline, I have at least shared that vision.

Notes

[1]Wallace A. Bacon, "A Sense of Being: Interpretation and the Humanities," The Southern Speech Communication Journal, 41 (Winter, 1976) p. 137

[2]Don L. Lee, Dynamite Voices I: Black Poets of the 1960's, (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) p. 23

[3]Stephen Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References, (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc. 1973) p. 3

[4]Henderson, p. 10

[5]Hilda-Njoki McElroy, Traditional Wit and Humor in Pan African Drama, Diss. (Northwestern University, 1973)

[6]Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 6

[7]Lamine Niang, "Negro African culture and poetry--elements of the survival of our civilization," New African Literature and the Arts, III ed. Joseph Okapu, (New York: The Third Press, 1973) p. 108

[8]Niang, p. 108

[9]Niang, p. 109

[10]Bacon, p. 138

[11]Niang, p. 109

[12]Levine, p. 33

[13]James Weldon Johnson, God's Trombones. Seven Negro Sermons in Verse, (New York: Viking Press, 1927) p. 5

Notes

[14]Carolyn M. Rodgers, "Uh Nat'Chal thang, the Whole Truth-Us," Black World, (September, 1971) p. 7

[15]William H. Robinson explains Franz Fanon's three part pattern of oppressed people's writings in Nommo: An Anthology of Modern Black African and Black American Literature, (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan, 1972) p. 7

[16]Lee, p. 23

[17]Lee, p. 35

[18]Henderson, p. 4

[19]Henderson, p. 3

[20]Henderson, p. 3

[21]Henderson, p. 61

[22]Henderson, p. 61

[23]J. Saunders Redding, "On Being Negro in America," On Being Negro in America, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1951) p. 123